

GOOMALLING NOONGAR RESERVE

Statement

HON COL HOLT (South West — Parliamentary Secretary) [10.04 pm]: When Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich stood and said she was going to talk about tomorrow being an important day, I thought it was going to be to celebrate International Talk Like a Pirate Day! Maybe there will be a contribution about that tomorrow! That was just a lighter note.

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: I don't even get it! I don't even know what you're talking about!

The PRESIDENT: Order, members! This is a house of Parliament, not a pirate ship!

Hon COL HOLT: I want to talk about something good that happened today. Although it might not be a significant event for the great state of Western Australia, it is for a group of local Aboriginal people from the community of Goomalling. I have worked with a group of Noongar people in Goomalling for the past few months, and we have been working with the local shire to recognise the local Aboriginal reserve as a place of significance for them. It began maybe a year and a half ago when they heard that the old native reserve, as it used to be called, on the edge of town that is now vested in the Shire of Goomalling was going to be turned into a light industrial area. When they heard this, they thought: no, this can't happen; this site is too significant for us and our families. Most of the people I have been working with are direct descendants of the Walley family, who were the first people to live on the edge of town in the native reserve. I remember quite clearly, because I am a Goomalling boy as well, that I would go to that reserve when I was very, very young—maybe six or seven years old—to interact with some of those Noongar kids. Those Noongar kids are now my age and are taking on leadership roles within their own community.

When they heard that this part of their culture, heritage and history could be turned into a light industrial area they knew they had to take some action. Interestingly enough, they decided to open up a dialogue with the local council that owned the land, to try to demonstrate to the council how important it was. I became involved probably 12 months ago, when we had a little meeting on the site with the local Aboriginal people—some of whom do not live there anymore but are descendants of the original Walley family—and a group of councillors. If members think about the Shire of Goomalling councillors and try to picture the type of people they are, and if members know that community at all, they tend to be of the older generation, and most are men from a European background; they tend to have a typical wheatbelt shire profile. Members would think there would be a dichotomy between the councillors' views of the world—maybe also some feeling of perhaps superiority or even a bit of a “right to rule”, if you like—and those of a group of Noongar people who have been part of that community and worked generally as labourers on farms or on the railway lines or at CBH or whatever and have been in that community for many, many years. But I have to say that that is not how it has been. The Shire of Goomalling has approached this situation exactly as the Noongar elders have. The councillors went to the site and talked with the Noongar group, and very quickly recognised that this site is very important to the Noongar people and that it should be part of our shared history. I remember talking about it with the shire and the Noongars, because it is also part of my shared history. Like I said, I remember going down there. I went to school and grew up with most of those elders who are now campaigning to maintain that site. Today we went to a shire meeting with a group of maybe 15 Noongar people, and the shire president signed a memorandum of understanding with six signatures from the Noongar community—the Goomal Aboriginal Committee as they call themselves—that recognised that that land will now be recognised in perpetuity for the significance it holds for local people. That is a tremendous outcome. I said to the councillors afterwards that they should be extremely proud of this moment and of getting to a point at which they can open up their hearts to the Noongar people and sign that memorandum of understanding.

I remember a young man called Willie Ponton, who is my age—so he is very young. We were born 12 hours apart and I went to school with him and have grown up with him my whole life. He stood up at the council meeting and said, from the bottom of his heart, how much he appreciated the councillors' attitude to the feelings of the Noongar people and what the councillors have done for them. It is an absolutely tremendous outcome for them. I thank the councillors from the Shire of Goomalling for taking that approach. I also thank the Goomal Aboriginal Committee, which could have tried to get native title and involve the South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council or lawyers. It could have set up a camp there, and it could have done all sorts of things, but its approach was always about working with the shire to get the best outcome it could without any problems or conflicts, and then to move together now that they have signed the MOU. The MOU is just the first step. The shire has also agreed to put a caveat on that title to protect it legally in the future. Again, that is a tremendous step for the shire to take. It could have put a temporary caveat on it, but the shire recognised that things could change in the future, so it put on an absolute caveat that protects the land because it recognises the MOU on the title.

It really warms my heart to think that I can play a part in that sort of reconciliation, and that is exactly what it is for the community of Goomalling, which has had its problems with racial division in the past. However, that sort of reconciliation is a tremendous outcome and I am pleased we have got to that point.